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# The perils of official secrecy

## What makes them think conservatives like the blinds closed?

The other day I got a call from a pleasant lady at the Cable News Network, with an inquiry typical of many I have received down through the years.

CNN, she told me, was considering a program on the leak of information about a U.S. military exercise in Honduras. The Pentagon had put together a press pool for the operation, and somehow or other the hush-hush story had gotten out. (The source of the leak still isn't known for certain, though accusations have been leveled at a reporter for the Mutual Radio Network.)

The implicit point of inviting my comment was that, as a conservative, I would take a pro-Pentagon view, and join in castigation of the wayward press. It was not unlike a lot of other invitations I have received, dating back to the Pentagon papers, the Watergate era, disputes involving the CIA, the invasion of Grenada. The conservative stance in all such cases is presumed to be in favor of official secrecy.

To which my answer is — not necessarily. Clearly, there are cases in which secrets must be withheld by government for national security purposes. Details about our weapons systems, planned military operations, and intelligence activities need to be protected. There is legitimate cause for concern when such matters get leaked to the press.

So affirming, though I have my disagreements with the CIA, I gladly testified a few years back in favor of the Intelligence Identities Protection Act, designed to scotch the activities of such as Philip Agee and others who have made careers of blowing the cover of our intelligence agents. (The other journalist who appeared with me before the House committee opposed the bill, and media opinion generally was, predictably, quite negative.)

Having said all that, I think it is a mistake for conservatives, or anyone

else, to adopt a knee-jerk position in favor of governmental secrecy, even when the practice is plastered over with a "national security" label. A host of evils can be — and have been — justified in this fashion. Far from protecting our national security, official cover-ups frequently have done the opposite — concealing acts of negligence and worse that harm our vital interests.

Among the matters documented in the Pentagon Papers, for instance, was the shocking complicity of many high officials of our government in the overthrow of President Diem of South Vietnam, a major turning point of the Indochina struggle in favor of the Communists. Why the Republican Nixon administration was anxious to conceal such data about the misdeeds of its Democratic predecessors was one of the great mysteries in that affair.

In a similar vein, we have only fragmentary information so far about the measures taken by the Jimmy Carter government to help topple the Somoza regime in Nicaragua, leading to the Sandinista victory in that country. I have made sporadic efforts to get such information from the Reagan State Department, but have encountered only the usual hostility to disclosure that is the hallmark of that agency.

Such secrecy is the rule on numerous other topics. The Carter administration fought to conceal drug-dealing charges against the Torrijos family in Panama, fearing that such information would jeopardize passage of the Canal treaties. Data about who is trading what to Moscow are tightly controlled, as I had reason to find out in a lengthy freedom-of-information suit in federal court. Facts about Soviet violations of the SALT accords have been bottled up for years.

None of these cover-ups — and numerous others that might be cited — are protective of our national security. Quite the contrary. Instead, they keep the American people from knowing what has been done to injure our security, ensuring that the responsible parties in government, and elsewhere, are shielded from the indignation of the public. The Soviets know who is trading with them, or what parts of SALT they have violated. It is the American people who are kept in ignorance.

For these and other reasons, reflexive support of governmental secrecy would be a very dangerous error. The public indeed has a right to know about such matters. Unfortunately, many of the media spokesmen who hold forth about this topic seem just as unwilling to dig out and report such information as the government is to turn it over.

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